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State seeks partners to make Great Places

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By Russ Oechsle
Journal correspondent

SPENCER, Iowa — Anita Walker's job is simple. As director of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs all she has to do is find three Iowa communities that want to partner with the state on a special project — any special product — to make those three communities "Great Places."

The caveat is that the project must yield quick and measurable results. Or, said Walker, there may be no continuation of what she's terming a "vision." Walker's department is hoping the three projects will represent diverse themes, as well.

Great Places is an initiative challenging state government to do its work differently — more collaboratively, more responsively, according to information distributed Wednesday as Walker addressed nearly 100 Northwest Iowa residents who gathered at

Spencer's SCT Playhouse.

Great Places is an effort that will involve not only the three pilot communities in the first year, but 19 state agencies, ranging from the Board of Regents to the Department of Corrections and the Iowa Alcoholic Beverages Commission.

"It's the first time 19 state agencies have ever worked in cooperation with each other," said Thom Guzman of the Iowa Department of Economic Development.

Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack asked each of the participating agencies to provide something of value for the project, or vision. While the Beverages Commission committed its trucks for use as billboards, Corrections officials provided homemade cookies for the audiences in each of the 10 communities where the vision is presented.

Community involvement isn't limited to municipalities, according to Walker. A community could be a neighborhood or a township in a rural area. The object, how-

ever, is the same: To find something that makes the community unique and add impact to make it a Great Place.

"Every little town in Iowa is not alike. They are all unique and special. Their story, their heritage, cultures are not just 'any' place, but 'some' place," Walker said.

One of Great Places' goals is to break down barriers within state government — between departments and between communities and the state government. Toward that end Walker expects to have coaching teams from three of the state departments working with each of the three pilot communities to facilitate individual endeavors. Walker expects participants to see things they've never seen before.

Full information about issuing an "invitation," not an application, to the state can be found on the Great Places website: www.iowagreatplaces.gov or by calling the Department of Cultural Affairs at 515-281-8824.

